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ABSTRACT

In 1961 a series of articles in "Harper's" magazine attracted national attention with its appraisal of campus life in the United States. Published in book form, David Boroff's views of U.S. colleges found more readers and an attentive audience among college faculty members. Boroff's reports on 10 well selected colleges confirmed the suspicions of many faculty members that all was not well in the U.S. higher education system. Boroff told his readers what college was like in the 1950s and predicted great changes in the next decade. It cannot be inferred that the stage for student protests was set by the "stupefying boredom" Boroff found on 1950 campuses, but it must be admitted that the challenges he posed for educators were relevant. (SLD)

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Recalling David Boroff's Classic:

CAMPUS U.S.A.: PORTRAITS OF AMERICAN COLLEGES IN ACTION

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In 1961 a series of articles published in Harper's Magazine attracted national attention with its candid appraisal of campus life in the United States. Published in book-form by Harper & Brothers, David Boroff's views on American colleges found an even more attentive audience among faculty members who were avid readers of The Atlantic Monthly, Saturday Evening Review, and Harper's in the 1950s. His reports on ten well selected colleges confirmed many faculty suspicions that all was not well in academe.

Boroff, a graduate of Brooklyn College (A.B.) and Columbia University (A.M.), was an associate professor of English at New York University, a military veteran of WWII, and a consultant to the Ford Foundation prior to his death in 1965 at the age of forty-two. Given the pungency of Boroff's observations, his book still serves as a fascinating account of campus life—as it was—in the years prior to the turbulent 1960s.

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The colleges visited by Boroff are grouped as four institutions with "a national character", three colleges with "a local flavor", and three institutions "for ladies mostly." Included in his "portraits" are Claremont's multi-college campus on the West Coast and Harvard on the East Coast. Michigan is located the furthest North—and Birmingham Southern is located in Alabama. Colleges "with a local flavor" are located in the East (Brooklyn College), in the Midwest (Parsons), and in the South (Birmingham-Southern). Swarthmore and Wisconsin join Harvard and Claremont as institutions with a national clientele. Smith and Sara Lawrence colleges are joined by Michigan, as a university still bothered by stereotypes of women graduate students.

Boroff immediately catches the reader's attention in an introductory chapter entitled, "What the Catalogues Never Tell You." Students interested in personal development, as well as academic achievement, do not find in most catalogues the information that fosters a "compatible marriage" between the college and the student. Thus, the purpose of his book is to describe "intimately and searchingly" colleges of varied types for students with varying needs and interests. Boroff believed that his book encompassed a wide spectrum of colleges that were representative of higher education at the time of his study.

In his closing chapter, Boroff gives a "summing up" of American colleges on the threshold of rapid expansion and ensuing

growing pains. To Boroff, it was self-evident that higher education in the late 1950s was "not good enough." One fault that irritated him was "the stupefying boredom" that resulted from higher education's "high-toned idiom." Another irritating fault was a prevalent drop-out rate of sixty percent—at the same time that "very few" graduates could be regarded as well educated "by decent standards."

In Boroff's opinion, society had imposed upon colleges "an almost hopeless array of tasks" that were much too similar to the tasks imposed upon secondary schools. Whatever the educational goals of the colleges he visited, they were both aristocratic *and* democratic—and at the same time both vocational *and* intellectual. As for college curricula, they were pulled "this way and that" depending upon whatever ideology might be influential at the time. Within college curricula, Boroff found "few good ideas"—too many new ideas were merely old ideas refurbished.

There was no ideal size for colleges, he contended, but small, rural colleges were like small, rural high schools—and "no more demanding" than a good high school. The reputations of universities were based on their graduate programs—not on the quality of undergraduate instruction! Like many critics of education, before and after the 1960s, Boroff believed that the quality of the teacher was more important than teaching methods. Neither the distribution of courses (breadth) nor their concentration (depth) were as important as teaching that "restlessly cuts across all methods."

WHAT COLLEGE IS REALLY LIKE

In his descriptions of campus life, Boroff was particularly sensitive to the influence colleges have on the personal development of students. He, like other educators, was aware that colleges do indeed have distinct personalities and characters. He was especially aware that students can be "stamped for life" by an institution's "official philosophy" or "culture" that is transmitted by each generation of students to the next. Colleges that attract students nationally are indeed different from colleges that enroll students locally. And in the 1950s, colleges for women did indeed differ from colleges for men. Thus, where students attend college could be a matter of primary concern in the senior year of high school.

The titles of Boroff's chapters convey unusually well the gist of his observations and reflections on college characteristics that affect student life on institutional campuses. The nation's oldest college is identified as "Imperial Harvard". Claremont is identified as "California's Multi-college Campus" while "On Wisconsin" signifies the progressiveness of a well known state university. In much the same manner, "Use Thy Gumption" seems quite appropriate for Swarthmore.

The subtitles for chapters on Brooklyn, Parsons, and Birmingham Southern, respectively and appropriately, are: "Culture in Flatbush," "Little School with Big Ideas," and "The Genteel Tradition on a Southern Campus." The subtitles for Smith and Sarah Lawrence, if not appropriate, are compelling invitations to read about "The College for All-Around Girls" and "For the Bright, Bold, and Beautiful." Only the subtitle, "Graduate Limbo for Women" in identifying the University of Michigan, gives us pause and raises a question or two.

The reader's interest in each chapter will vary with his or her familiarity with each particular institution. The chapters on Smith and Sarah Lawrence colleges are quite informative to those of us who have little knowledge of two well known institutions. There is much to be learned from reading Boroff's observations and comments about Harvard, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Claremont. Swarthmore and Brooklyn are colleges that some of us have heard a great deal about, but we can still benefit from reading what Boroff has written.

Two chapters of special interest are those on Parsons College and Birmingham Southern—two institutions about which many of us heard or read in the late 1960s. In Millard Roberts' presidency at Parsons, we can read the initial stages of the managerial revolution that was in full force by the early 1970s. As discussed by Boroff, the experiences of Parsons College are pre-views of managerial concepts and principles that continued to be advocated in the 1980s—before taking a different form in the 1990s.

Boroff's profiles of Parsons and Birmingham Southern colleges provide us with an amazing contrast in educational traditions and values. From a later point-of-view, it is possible to see Parsons College as riding a wave of the future. Led by a charismatic president who literally "put his college on the map" and became a featured personality-in-the-news, Parsons College was, for several years, one of the most discussed institutions in the nation.

The story of Parsons College was based on a remarkable turn-around in finances—a feat attributed to managerial efficiency, marketing strategies, technological adaptations, and commercialization. But more important, perhaps, Parsons College was the story of its president, Millard Roberts. As identified by *Campus U.S.A.*, President Roberts was a Presbyterian minister, an ex-football player, a Navy chaplain, and teacher—with a Ph.D. from Chicago, and as adroit with a financial statement as with a sermon.

Boroff tells us that Roberts took "his cues" from Beardsley Ruml's often cited, "Memo to a College Trustee". Ruml believed the liberal college to be "the central hope for educational salvation" and recommended a radical re-structuring of the curriculum, faculty teaching loads, and faculty-student ratios. To be more productive and profitable, colleges should take no pride in ratios as low as five students to one teacher—but should insist on ratios of at least twenty to one. The objective was to eliminate small classes and to capitalize on large classes with seventy or eighty students.

In comparison with Parsons College, Birmingham Southern can be seen as a college with a lingering past. Boroff writes that Birmingham Southern had an amicable rivalry with Agnes Scott, Davidson, University of the South, Southwestern at Memphis, and Randolph-Macon. The president, however, was seeking excellence in terms of national standards, and the college was more responsive to current challenges as an institution located in the south. When ninety-seven students signed a petition protesting the expulsion of students at Alabama State for participating in lunch-room sit-ins, the president responded quite firmly that freedom of speech was not a right that anyone should have to explain or defend.

Dr. Henry King Stanford is identified as "that rare phenomenon—a popular college president". Both the college and its president represent a "mingling" of the old and the new in their appreciation of southern traditions and their awareness of current realities. Boroff calls attention to the fact that Stanford has excellent academic credentials and considerable experience outside the region and the nation. His relations with college benefactors signify that he "has won a secure place in his short tenure".

Birmingham Southern's faculty is described as "pleasant, amiably argumentative, and intellectually alert". Their salaries are modest but not out of line with salaries at comparable colleges. The modesty of faculty salaries is also tempered by housing arrangements that include loans for building. Noting the difficulty that smaller colleges have in holding outstanding faculty members, Boroff cites the loss of one faculty member who became head of the history department at the University of Georgia. Years later Henry King Stanford would become president of the University of Georgia and is now president emeritus.

Other interesting comparisons can be made from Boroff's "portraits" of Smith and Sarah Lawrence colleges. They, too, could be identified as institutions of higher education in which traditions strengthen image and reputation. Smith was regarded as the "very archtype of the good women's college" while Sarah Lawrence was susceptible to parody because it was indeed "an ultraswank finishing school."

In its "apotheosis" of the All-American girl (upper-class style), Smith was described as somewhere between "the artistic ardors of Sarah Lawrence" and "the austere bookishness of Bryn Mawr". In comparison, Sarah Lawrence was "progressive but guardedly so," according to its former president Harold Taylor. Whereas English and history were the most popular majors among Smith's 2,200 students, Sarah Lawrence placed a greater emphasis on the individual potentiality of students and expected them to formulate programs in accordance with their interests.

At Smith 230 faculty members taught 312 courses in twenty-nine departments of instruction. At Sarah Lawrence, professorial ranks were non-existent and instructors held weekly conferences with each student in their classes. As interviews with students disclosed, Sarah Lawrence was "intellectually more exciting" while Smith was "academically stimulating." The expected outcome for Smith students was "a social refinement and culture" that would enable graduates "to feel at home in good society." Learning and "the active use of knowledge" were expected outcomes at Sarah Lawrence.

To an appreciable extent, Smith and Sarah Lawrence are indicative of the patchwork quilt that Boroff displays in his profiles of colleges and universities. Each college was entitled to its own pattern and could display—at the same time—a lingering past and a continuing future. In such ways, both colleges attain their own image and reputation—and their own goal of excellence.

RELEVANCE AND IMPLICATIONS

The relevance of Boroff's *Campus U.S.A.* in the year 2000 is stated best in his critical observations and inferences concerning the status and condition of higher education in the years following World War II. The purposes of education were taken for granted then, much as they are taken for granted today. As Boroff implied throughout his series, he talked with students in different locations and he listened to what they had to say. More important for our purposes here, he wrote his opinions and beliefs in a readable form and they are available to critics and observers of higher education many years later.

Boroff does indeed tell others what college was like in the 1950s—and his advice to others was straightforward. "Talk to students," he wrote, "and you can compile a bleak anthology of boredom, inertia, and ineptness among teachers." Universities relied too heavily on large lecture classes, staffed by "topnotch professors, with small sections covered by graduate assistants of uneven talent." To Boroff, such arrangements reflected "an indifference to—even a contempt for—undergraduate instruction."

He also stated that teacher/student ratios were "a sacred cow" and he implied that small classes, as they were currently taught, were the induction of "mediocrity with intimacy"—attributing the term to a president of Fisk University.

Looking ahead ten years, he foresaw "a revolution with the happiest consequences for higher education". That revolution would be brought about by the stringencies of the 1960s. In his estimation, the need for economy would force colleges to foster independent study and to encourage learning habits that endure.

In retrospect, readers should not forget that Boroff's portraits were written in the 1950s and published in 1961, the first year of John F. Kennedy's administration. Thus, the students he interviewed and cited were members of a generation born in the late 1930s

WHAT BOROFF WOULD HAVE OBSERVED FORTY YEARS LATER

1. He would find better written educational journals—but very few articles written with "grace and sophistication."

2. College curricula are still "pulled this way and that" depending on "ideological leanings" —and the current wave of curricular reform!

3. Colleges are still susceptible to "academic snobbery"—and other forms of unwarranted confidence in the quality of undergraduate instruction.

4. Higher education is no longer regarded as a "birth-right for able students"—but as an entitlement.

5. Higher education is still subject to fads and fashions that are "mostly old ideas refurbished."

6. American universities still rely too much on lectures to large classes—but great strides are being made in the uses of technology.

7. "A bleak anthology of boredom, inertia, and ineptness among teachers" can still be compiled—by talking to students!

8. "Absurd standards of gentility" no longer prevails—but many campuses could benefit from a better semblance of civility.

9. Scholarly journals still "go unread" by students and faculty—but their rejection rates never go unnoticed by promotion committees.

10. Bright students, when asked to analyze critically a book or journal article, still will turn in what they think the instructor wants.

11. "The image of the college teacher" did indeed "become youthful"—for a while —and then, it became "the greying professoriate."

12. Many institutions are now in position "to try the leap for excellence" but their constituencies would rather have an increase in national rankings.

or early 1940s. The generation of students in the 1950s were often called "the silent generation" because they listened and learned without comment on the value or usefulness of what they were learning. Other students wanted only what was immediately applicable in their work or personal lives. The latter, in many colleges, were often older students who were job-oriented and in a hurry to make-up for "lost time" in what they called "dead-end jobs."

There are several ways, therefore, in which Boroff's colleges depict the promise of higher education at the time of his visits. Many of us who read his articles in Harper's found his essays encouraging and on-target. We knew that our students were not intellectually excited about theories, fundamentals, or detailed explanations but they listened—and thereby gave instructors the satisfaction of knowing that "seeds had been sown".

Although Boroff summarizes well his observations and impressions, we need not agree with all well-worded phrases of praise or disdain. It's more interesting to speculate on how well his essays signal the events on college campuses that began in 1964 and continued into the 1970s. We cannot infer that the stage for student protests was set by the "stupefying boredom" he found on 1950 campuses. And yet, we should acknowledge the many challenges he posed for college faculty and administrators who served at a disadvantage in the 1960s. And in closing, we can agree or disagree with his observation, "It is just possible that professors and students are actors in a vast comedy, a mad travesty of solemn ritual, wasted time, and trumped-up claims"—but we should not argue with his judgment that higher education is still "not good enough."

THIS ISSUE . . .

This issue of IHE PERSPECTIVES recalls one of the unanimous choices in a recent effort to identify one hundred outstanding books about higher education (Fincher, Keller, Bogue, and Thelin, 100 Classic Books, Phi Delta Kappa, 2001). As one of many excellent books published in 1960, give and take two years, Boroff's Campus U.S.A. was undoubtedly one of the most widely read books in those years.

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